

INVOLVING YOUTH, ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME: THE RAPID RESPONSE TEAM APPROACH

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THE NEED FOR ACTION

As school safety and security issues command greater attention, we are presented with an opportunity to engage our youth and young adults. Students need to be involved in meaningful ways in their schools. In addition, those who are more connected with their school are less likely to exhibit inappropriate behavior. While many schools have begun to develop plans to address crisis issues, few have included in such plans appropriate educational and training opportunities for their students. The Central Arkansas Chapter of the American Red Cross launched a Rapid Response Team (RRT) initiative that provides a basis for Red Cross and local school partnership. The program benefits are many; increased preparedness of faculty and students, exposure to emergency management principles through student involvement in the school's crisis planning process, and development of future volunteers, among others. Most importantly, participation in a Rapid Response Team empowers students to take on leadership roles in their schools and inspires them to be active members of their community.

THE NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP

Schools are not exempt from the daily potential for crisis. Students and faculty face the threat of natural, technological, and civil hazards every day. In addition, school violence has become an almost daily occurrence. Although schools are required to plan for these crises by identifying an adult chain of command, establishing rules and procedures, and identifying evacuation routes, they often omit any meaningful roles for students. Staff and students are instructed where to go and how to sit. Teachers are trained to lock their doors to keep out potentially violent intruders.

As important as these elements are, they do not adequately prepare a school to respond to a crisis. What happens if the adult chain of command is disrupted, or the number of those injured exceeds the trained staff's ability to handle? Without a planned focus on student leadership or education for students and staff on how to handle emergencies, additional injury and preventable death are more likely to occur. This situation is magnified for schools in rural areas that have limited emergency medical service resources or have to share that service with other municipalities. Still other questions remain. Many believe youth are too inexperienced to be involved in such crucial situations as assisting with emergencies. Others feel that working with youth involves complex legal issues. But the fact remains; students as well as faculty are co-occupants of school buildings and must be involved.

Another problem confronting organizations, especially those that rely on volunteers, is the lack of citizens expressing interest in volunteering. When President Bush unveiled his Citizen Corp initiative to the American public, he emphasized the need for each and every citizen to become involved. Youth should not be left out or over looked. In fact, if youth are exposed to meaningful volunteer opportunities, they will be more inclined to embrace volunteerism as a long-term commitment. As the nation's population base becomes older, we must make an effort to reach out to our youth to replenish our volunteer corp. There has to be opportunities for them to become a part of and make a difference in their communities.

INVOLVING YOUTH

In an endeavor to offer a single solution to these problems, the American Red Cross in Arkansas has partnered with Arkansas High Schools, made up of grades 9-12, to launch an initiative that enables students to become involved in meaningful ways. The Rapid Response Team concept, started three years ago, offers students an opportunity to develop skills, knowledge, and

leadership in preventing and responding to crisis situations. Most importantly, students involved in a Rapid Response Team have the opportunity to educate their peers on the importance of being ready for emergencies. Students are trained in first aid, Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), and Automated External Defibrillation (AED) skills as well as Red Cross disaster training, Introduction to Disaster Services and Mass Care. Schools utilize students to be members of crisis preparedness planning teams, members of peer intervention groups, or as trained crisis responders. Students with an interest in medical professions, emergency management, non-profit organizations or those exploring opportunities for a career after high school benefit from this program. The program encourages students to become proactive in their schools when it comes to safety and allows organizations an avenue to recruit young people to become Red Cross volunteers.

GETTING STARTED

Once schools express interest in establishing a Rapid Response Team, they identify a faculty member to be the team's sponsor. This individual provides guidance and supervision for to the team. The school also selects an initial core of students that will make up the team. Once chosen, both the sponsor and student team members are provided training. The sponsors receive background information to familiarize them with the Rapid Response Team project and offered a step-by-step process to organize and engage student team members. They also attend certification training in order to teach first aid, CPR, and AED skills. The initial group of student team members also receive their training from the Chapter. The students receive first aid, CPR, and AED training as well as Red Cross disaster training. This challenging, hands-on training includes team building activities and leadership training. Student training culminates with a mass casualty exercise that puts to use their newly developed skills. Once trained, the team is officially

recognized by the school and afforded full status as a campus organization. The school provides the team an opportunity to serve as part of the crisis planning team. Schools will also foster opportunities for the team to provide safety and preparedness information to staff, peers, lower grade level students, and the local community. The Rapid Response Teams can be a separate school club or part of an existing organization such as Health Occupation Students of America, Skills-USA, or the Student Council. Funding requirement for establishing and maintaining a team are minimal, cost is limited to the training material needed. This is possible because the initial training is provided by the local Red Cross Chapter and the certification of sponsors as instructors, enabling them to train future team members and faculty.

CONCLUSION

Currently there are ten Rapid Response Teams functioning throughout Arkansas' High Schools. All have been well accepted. Many of the comments from administrators and faculty affirm the program's value. The most active team, Huntsville High Rapid Response Team, has branched out into three areas: community/emergency services, peer tutoring, and peer counseling. The opportunities are many and are ultimately determined by the students with guidance from their sponsors. Student involvement in our schools has always been essential, but in today's environment it has become critical. The increase in natural disasters, terrorism, and school violence, requires a comprehensive and all-inclusive approach to any school's preparedness measures. As primary occupants in the school setting, involvement of students cannot be overlooked. The Rapid Response Team initiative provides administrators an avenue to prepare students and faculty for the unexpected. Overall, the project has the capacity to impact school planning, student and staff education, and community interest and involvement in school crisis prevention, intervention, and response.

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